

Locating the researcher in the research: Personal narrative

Locating the researcher in the research: Personal narrative and reflective practice

Jan du Preez

Queensland University of Technology, Kelvin Grove, Queensland, Australia

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Introduction

As I write this, I am sitting at a window of the library of the university where I work as a counsellor. It is a glorious spring morning and the vista from the third level is breathtakingly beautiful. The library building forms one side of a quadrangle which is planted with a variety of mature trees, shading the lawns and paths that dissect the space between the buildings. Students sit at the benches, some in dappled shade and others seeking out a sunny spot. I review the paragraphs I have written and begin to ponder the responses I would make to the question: how is it that you are here, now, doing this study? (Author's personal diary, 30 October 2007).

This paper illustrates how personal narrative and reflective practice—in the form of an autoethnography—are used as a means of locating the researcher in research. First definitional issues are addressed; the concept of 'narrative' comes under scrutiny, and the relationship to 'reflective practice' is established. Next, autoethnography is introduced as an approach to personal narrative. The background of a doctoral study of which the reflective practice forms a thread, will be briefly outlined. Thereafter autoethnography will be employed as an example of reflective practice. Finally, concluding remarks will address a reflection of the experience of writing this paper.

Definitional issues

The range of scholarly work with 'narrative' as topic is evidence of the positive status of this approach in qualitative research (e.g. Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Mishler, 1986; Polkinghorne, 2004; Reissman, 2004; Sarbin, 1986; White & Epston, 1990). By way of definition, 'narrative' refers "to a specific kind of prose text (the story) and to the particular kind of configuration that generates a story (emplotment)" (Polkinghorne, 1995, p.5).

Narrative research is often subsumed under 'reflective practice' or 'reflexive practice', and at times the terms are used interchangeably (Fook, 1999). In these terms, 'reflection' is taken to mean a *process* of looking back, as it were, on the ways one's assumptions and actions influence the way one behaves or practices (Fook, 1999; Hughes & Heycox, 2005). By way of specific example, Smith and Squire (2007) employ narrative methods to 'reflect' on their respective conditions (Acquired Brain Injury and Parkinson's disease) and to 'reflect' on their relationship as student-and-mentor; this process enables them to ultimately "forge new identities" based on new understandings of the meanings attached to their relationship (Smith & Squire, 2007, p.376).

Narrative approaches

The psychological counselling and therapy literature contains numerous exemplars of autobiographical narrative, illustrating a prime motivation to fulfill a need for meaning (Baumeister & Newman, 1994; Etherington, 2001; House, 2007; Kirkman, 1999). Of particular relevance to this paper are accounts by researchers of their involvement in the research endeavour. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) point out that "narrative inquiry characteristically begins with the researcher's autobiographically oriented narrative

associated with the *research puzzle*” (italics in original) (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p.41).

It is suggested that a particular form of narrative, namely autoethnography, has much to offer the researcher interested in using personal narrative to locate themselves in the research. A definition of autoethnography as “a self-narrative that critiques the situatedness of self with others in social contexts” (Spry, 2001, p.710) highlights the self-critical element entailed in writing about oneself. Autoethnographic accounts of experience, by virtue of being self-reflective, are deeply personal (Muncey, 2005). Researchers utilizing this style of writing must produce “a highly personalized, revealing text in which an author tells stories about his or her own lived experience” (Richardson, 1994, p.521). One application of autoethnography is investigating researchers’ experience of participating in research (McIlveen, in press) and there are a few examples within the psychology literature (e.g. Langhout, 2006; McIlveen, 2007; Smith, 2004).

The following section will incorporate my understanding of narrative and autoethnography into an exploration of my development and the development of my research ideas. As such it is not written in a linear chronological manner, but rather jumps across time, backward and forward, from experiential perspective to theoretical perspective and back again.

The proposed study

In an early draft of my research proposal for a doctoral study I attempted to express something of the genesis of the research, and in doing so included some autobiographical details. Although this was intended to locate the researcher in the research I was advised that this writing might be better placed in an appendix to the thesis. However, in cutting the section from the introduction, I began to ponder what further information might be useful to contextualize my researcher position. What I wished to express is summed up by ‘parenthetical considerations’ a concept used by an esteemed colleague (P. McIlveen, personal communication, 24 August, 2005). This concept implies a consideration of issues not sufficiently critical to the argument of a thesis to be included in the main body, yet containing background and contextual information that *demand*s a place, albeit in parentheses. Thus I began to consider what ‘parenthetical considerations’ informed my study. The next question was how to present my ‘parenthetical considerations’. The notes (musings) which began this paper are continued here:

I review the paragraphs I have written and begin to ponder the responses I would make to the question: how is it that you are here, now, doing this study? A gentle breeze strokes the new growth in the upper reaches of the canopy of trees; when I look at the green of the trees and the blue of the sky above the trees I am only vaguely aware of the other world, of the people strolling along the paths. As I shift my gaze I begin to focus on the world at ground level, and the world of trees and sky form my peripheral view. I realize that the capacity to shift focus is analogous to shifting between timeframes. I realise that I need to write about my journey to this point, confident that this will enable me to focus fully on writing up my introductory chapter, and then to assemble my notes and thoughts to fit the structure I have developed for the remainder of the thesis. I cannot maintain a focus on the present and the past simultaneously. I find myself prepared to write

about the experiences that will begin to answer the question I will put to my research participants: how is it that you are here, now, doing this study. (Author's personal diary, 30 October 2007).

It is asserted that research within a qualitative, phenomenological framework generally begins with the question: "In the present case, how can we describe everyday human experience in ways that can be comprehensible, if not necessarily acceptable, to empirically minded social scientists?" (Pollio, Henley, & Thompson, 1997, p.28). The doctoral study in which I am engaged has its genesis in a similar question, and participants will be asked: "how is it that you are here, now, as a mature age student, starting an undergraduate degree?"

Following this 'generative question' which is "intended to stimulate the interviewee's main narrative" (Flick, 2006, p.173) further prompts are designed to stimulate recall and reconstruction of experiences relating to self-efficacy. The research aims to co-construct a self-efficacy narrative with each of the participants. The theoretical underpinning of this work is social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986, 1989), with particular reference to self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997). It is fitting to quote Bandura (1989) directly on the topic of self-reflection in relation to self-efficacy:

If there is any characteristic that is distinctively human, it is the capability for reflective self-consciousness. This enables people to analyze their experiences and to think about their own thought processes. By reflecting on their varied experiences and on what they know, they can derive generic knowledge about themselves and the world around them. People not only gain understanding through reflection, they evaluate and alter their own thinking by this means. In verifying thought through self-reflective means, they monitor their ideas, act on them or predict occurrences from them, judge from the results the adequacy of their thoughts, and change them accordingly (Bandura, 1989, p. 58).

Returning to my doctoral study and in responding to the research question, it is anticipated that participants will gain a fuller appreciation and understanding of their reasoning for commencing their academic endeavour. It is hoped that engaging in this process will, in turn, provide the participants with a set of guidelines or heuristics that can serve as a reference when they (inevitably) encounter obstacles in pursuit of their goals. The creation of the self-efficacy narrative may serve to facilitate a change in the individual's internal cognitive structures or 'schemata' (Markus, 1998). It is envisaged that the narratives about self-efficacy developed with mature age students will story their journey up to the point of entering university, and provide a narrative that moves beyond the past and the present, to preparing for the future.

Returning to my diary entry, while I have concluded that I will not use an autoethnographic approach to my research, the idea of locating my position as researcher by means of autoethnography intrigues me (Ellis, 1997; Ellis & Bochner, 1992; Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Reference to autoethnography is largely absent from the counselling and psychology literature, and my work may contribute toward remedying this. For example, Bleakley (2000) laments the influence of objectivity in academic writing in education and psychology, noting that this can result in writing that "can be said to lack body and image" (p.12). Lyn Richards advocates presenting data in creative ways as 'illuminated

description' whereby the "reader is immersed in the situation, vividly pictures the people, hears the voices, and is moved by the experiences" (Richards, 2005, p.196). What of the danger of personal narratives being too personal? Ellis and Bochner (1992) demonstrate how the telling of profoundly personal stories "becomes a social process for making lived experience understandable and meaningful" (Ellis and Bochner 1992, p. 80).

Reading personal narratives, even in the guise of novels informed by personal experience, provides the reader with the opportunity to understand the lifeworld of the author or protagonist, a lifeworld that may be beyond the scope of the realms of possibility because of the narrator's gender, race, culture, historical era or experience; Howard (1991) refers to this as 'empathic experiencing'. Carolyn Ellis writes of her experience while reading a powerful novel, and recalling that she initially thought about a number of issues presented by the author, and reflecting on similarities and differences between events in the novel and her own life. Next, she describes a different level of response: "This cognitive awareness was accompanied by emotional, bodily and spiritual reactions" (Ellis, 1997, p.116). Subsequently, Ellis (1997, p.117) "sought and found solace" in the power of evocative literature which held reference to her personal experience of loss and grief; this series of events contributed to the development of a form of research that deliberately blurs the boundary between storytelling and traditional social science research, namely autoethnography (Ellis & Bochner, 2000).

Returning to my study, it will be during the first interview that research participants will be asked a range of questions that will provide some context for their being at university, studying a particular program, at this particular juncture of their adult life. In essence, the responses should answer the question: 'how is it that you are here, now, doing this study?' In keeping with the intention for a collaborative approach to research, it should be reasonably expected that the same question should be put to the researcher. The resulting 'personal story' should incorporate the "creation and discovery of our life history or herstory, the way in which the pieces make or do not make sense to a person" (Kenyon & Randall, 1997, p. 16).

Reflective/reflexive practice: life and doctoral studies

To begin to address the question of how it is that I, the researcher, am doing this study, now, and here, one needs to go back to the 17th century. My ahnentafel (a German word meaning 'ancestor table') reveals that in 1688 my forebears left France, the country of their birth, as displaced persons (T. du Preez, personal communication, 31 August, 2006). A brief historical note is required to contextualize this migration. The Edict of Nantes, a decree giving partial religious freedom to the French Protestants (Huguenots), was proclaimed by Henry IV, King of France, in 1598. When Louis XIV revoked the edict in 1685, hundreds of thousands of Huguenots were forced to flee France and take refuge in Protestant countries (Grant, 1969; Smiles, 1877). My ancestors fled to the Netherlands, and thence onto South Africa, where they settled in 1688.

Reporting my ancestry has salience in that I recall being told as a child that this heritage bestowed special characteristics on families of Huguenot descent; these characteristics included "a cheerful disposition, stamina, artistic ability, individualism and a sense of independence, a love for personal and political freedom, courtesy, hospitality, humour and joyfulness, and ingenuity (the ability to make a plan)" (Viljoen, n.d., para. 11). I recall the words of encouragement often spoken when as a child one

faced difficulties: “‘n Boer maak ‘n plan”. The message, in the Afrikaans language, translates as: ‘an Afrikaner can always devise a plan or solution for a problem’. Upon reflection, this mantra, implying a ‘can do’ attitude, imparted as part of the socialization and educative process, foreshadows the topic of the research that will be form the basis of a doctoral thesis, namely self-efficacy.

My Huguenot forebears multiplied and prospered, becoming part of the South African landscape, contributing to the social and economic life. Fast forward through the centuries, marked by the conflicts of the white settlers with the blacks settlers, by the wars with the British, by the World Wars fighting on the part of the Allies, by the so-called border wars against the Communists. The social milieu in which I grew up was that tainted by the Apartheid regime, of which I was part and yet somehow not party to. My family was white, middle class, respectable and hardworking. As much as I can recall the differences between peoples was not a major topic of conversation, yet the differences were clear in all aspects of social conduct. Only later did I realise that the separateness of peoples—in where they lived, what kind of work they did, which schools they attended—everything was based on the doctrine of separateness, and enforced in law.

A note about reference to ‘colour’ is inserted here before the reader questions the emphasis on ‘white’. Colour of skin (race?) has been the identifier in South African history by which social and political policies have been implemented. This is not dissimilar to what has happened in many other parts of the world colonized by European powers. It serves to locate the author in the context where ‘white’ is seen as synonymous with ‘oppressor’, and yet recognition is required of the context; “we have different interpretations because we were positioned in different places due to, among other things, race” (Langhout, 2006, p.271).

One aspect that differentiated young males in the South Africa of my youth was the issue of national service. As Holt (2004) poignantly observes, *white* males living in South Africa in the late 1960s to mid-1990s accepted without question that they would be required to complete a period of national service some time between leaving school and starting a career. For many this entailed a stint of ‘border duty’. This was taken to mean patrolling the area between South West Africa (present day Namibia) and Angola and Zimbabwe, but for some conscripts it involved being part of an invasion force into Angola. The rationale for the national service was to provide a buffer zone around South Africa, to protect the (white?) inhabitants from the ‘communists’ who were intent, or so we were told, on upturning the Christian way of life. It makes no sense when one thinks that the majority of South Africa’s inhabitants were, by political definition, the enemy. The numbers of young (white) men, barely out school, who died in the defense of ‘their’ country, was generally small yet highly significant. A substantially greater number of young (white) men suffered Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, and were ill-served by the Government in terms of recognition, support or treatment. An even greater number of young white men were left in a state of long term confusion as to their place in a united South Africa, and many doubted that they had, in fact, any place in the ‘rainbow nation’.

By virtue of my background (and a modicum of hard work and application) I had access to a university education once I completed my national service. My father stood as guarantor for a bank loan, gladly, in recognition of some academic talent and partly to fulfill his thwarted ambition of completing a higher education award. My father was the

first in his family to attend university, but he never completed his course of study—the lure of lucrative employment prospects on the gold mines held sway.

The following twenty years of my life unfolds as many lives do, with love and marriage, career and family making for a contented existence, by and large. By the time I realised I was approaching middle age, I began to question whether I was in fact in the right place, or whether the time had come to find a more suitable place to live and to work. My world was becoming increasingly dangerous, and I perceived increasing risks to being able to provide a safe and secure future for my family. Among the newspaper cuttings filed in the journal I kept at the time I now find a pamphlet published by an organization called People Opposed to Women Abuse (POWA), calling for support for a petition to be handed to the country's President on National Women's Day (9 August 1999). I am shocked (again) by the statistics reported:

A woman or child is raped every 26 seconds in South Africa.

One million women and children are raped each year in South Africa.

One in two South African women will be raped in her lifetime.

75% of rapes are gang rapes.

Only 7% of the 49,000 reported rapes in 1998 were prosecuted.

Lawlessness, unemployment and violent crime was rampant; this, we were told by the newly elected democratic government, was the legacy of Apartheid. As I read my journal and retype the words I relive the sense of hopelessness I felt at the time:

I love this land. But I have nothing that ties me, which binds me emotionally, to such an extent that I cannot bear the thought of leaving. My identity is more closely tied up in my role as spouse and parent, and that family unit can be located in any environment which is safe, secure, and economically viable; then it will still serve to keep my identity intact. Since the elements in our present environment are not safe, not secure or economically viable, the imperative is to move, to seek out a place where we can, as individuals and as a family, feel challenged rather than threatened, feel that our patriotism comes from being involved in the present, rather than in the past. (Author's personal diary, 28 September 1999).

I have not read any firsthand accounts of the French Huguenots, and do not equate my experiences to those of my ancestors who fled the country of their birth to escape religious persecution and the real possibility of death. I do see a parallel of taking a decision to take a leap of faith in seeking out a better life in a far-off country. Three hundred years after my ancestors arrived in South Africa, I left the country of my birth to settle in a new land — Australia, the 'lucky country'. Like my forebears, I set about the process of adapting to life in a new country. This entailed engaging with all levels of life — finding work, finding a place to stay, finding schools for our children, trying to make new friends, learning about the everyday practices of the natives, trying to fit in. My family and I were not alone: Maharaj (2004) suggests that at a conservative estimate over 230,000 South Africans emigrated to the UK, USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand

between 1989 and 1997. The main reasons given by people leaving South Africa are unacceptable levels of crime and violence, poor economic prospects, and deteriorating services, especially education and health services (Maharaj, 2004).

Returning to my translocation to Australia, this presented the opportunity to do doctoral level studies; this related to ‘unfinished business’ in the sense that I had previously started reading towards a doctorate, but had never completed it. One set of reasons for this relate to the fact that my energies had been re-directed toward planning to emigrate. Another set of reasons relate to the way the discipline of psychology has evolved, with implications for the practices in clinical and research training – elements of this story will be shared below but a more elaborate narrative will have to be told at another time.

Upon reflection, the felt need to complete that aspect of my lifework—that element of ‘unfinished business’—brings to mind another formative influence. I have a printed quotation about persistence, attributed to Calvin Coolidge, 30th president of the United States of America, which has served as a reminder over time that the application of sustained effort will yield results. The quotation is as follows:

Nothing in the world can take the place of Persistence. Talent will not; nothing is more common than unsuccessful men with talent. Genius will not; unrewarded genius is almost a proverb. Education will not; the world is full of educated derelicts. Persistence and determination alone are omnipotent. The slogan ‘Press On’ has solved and always will solve the problems of the human race.

More recent personal information links my past life and work to the present. I have worked as a psychologist and counsellor in the student support services section at a regional university in Australia since July 2001. In my work context, I have become increasingly interested in the cohort of mature age students. A significant proportion of students attending this university are mature aged, many are so-called ‘first generation’ students (being the first in their family to attend university), and many juggle multiple roles of student and parent/spouse/employee. The experience of returning to study after some years, or attending university for the first time, presents many of these students with a formidable set of difficulties. The student population at the university is characterised by a number of factors that impact on progression and retention. A counselling intervention often includes an exploration with the student/client of the meaning of the difficulties or obstacles or constraints for them as an individual. From this co-exploration of their experience, many students report arriving at a new understanding of themselves, and often report a new-found ability to generate solutions to their difficulties, with an increased sense of confidence in their ability to be successful students (Finlay, 2003; Gough, 2003). My clients and I have much in common; although we have the language (English) to communicate with the locals, there is much to learn about ways of doing things in the way they are done in an unfamiliar place (university for them, country for me); coming to terms with the academic discourse is analogous to learning a new language (a new dialect at the very least).

A means of assisting (mature age) students prepare for their university journey forms the basis of my proposed thesis, but another aspect of *my* story must first be told—as mentioned above this is not the full story, merely the grist for a narrative yet to be told in fuller detail. Historically, my training in psychology was fairly traditional in the sense that there was a strong emphasis on psychopathology and psychometric assessment

throughout. My postgraduate studies and training were undertaken part time while working full time, giving me a hard-won appreciation for some of the difficulties mature age students face in managing competing priorities. More significantly, my work at one time was in a school psychological centre where the brief was to assess children who had been referred by the school they attended. On reflection, the aspects of this practice that clearly stands out as most unsatisfactory is the mechanistic manner in which the ‘clients’ were processed – identified as somehow being problems, ‘referred to the school shrink to be tested’, and allocated to a limited range of ‘treatments’ – remedial class, remedial school, special class, special school.

The research topic for my master’s degree was generated from my work at the time – there were several young children referred towards the end of each school year, presenting with a combination of social, academic, behavioural and emotional ‘problems’, who were held back (du Preez, 1989). The belief was that it was in the interests of the student to repeat the first year. The study was inconclusive – no clear model of decision-making on the part of teachers emerged. I later realised that I had conducted my research—quite appropriately and ethically—with ‘research subjects’ and not with ‘research participants’. I had not fully appreciated their experience. I had missed an opportunity to ask for the story of their experience – of how it felt to be told that you would be repeating the first year of ‘big school’ while your classmates went on to the next class. I had missed the opportunity to ask for the story of the parents of these children – of how it felt to be told that *your* child would be repeating the first year of ‘big school’ while your child’s classmates went on to the next class. I had missed the opportunity to ask for the story of the teachers of these children – of how it felt to tell a child that they would be repeating the first year of ‘big school’ while the child’s classmates went on to the next class. These haunting thoughts prepared me well for an alternate view, that of an empathic understanding of ‘lived experience’ as encapsulated by phenomenology.

Thus, to conclude the brief response to my own question, as to how it is that I am here, now, doing this work, I am ready to explore with my *research participants* how we can develop self-efficacy narratives as a way to bring to consciousness the lessons from our past to help us deal with the challenges of the present, and achieve objectives still imagined in a future timeframe.

Reflections and discussion

I have experienced a sense of relief at having written this narrative, of having put together the series of events, influences and decisions that have brought me to the point of embarking on my doctoral research journey. There is a keen sense too of having disclosed a great deal at a very personal level; this ‘self-disclosure’ leaves me feeling rather vulnerable (Etherington, 2007; Vickers, 2002) yet satisfied that this is the consequence of writing a ‘heartful autoethnography’ (Ellis, 1999).

Reading back over the elements of my life that have been presented here I sense that this could be a redemptive story (McAdams, 2006), one in which the protagonist experiences some setbacks and even pain but that the outcomes are positive. Yet it is not a matter of ‘happy ever after’ as McAdams (2006) notes that “for all their psychological and moral strength, redemptive life stories sometimes fail, and they may reveal dangerous

shortcomings and blind spots” (p.12). I would certainly identify with this view, yet feel confident that the failings and shortcomings contribute to my practice as a counsellor. I anticipate that the new-found awareness and acceptance of vicissitudes in my own life will enhance my empathy with my clients’ experiences (Howard, 1991; McIlveen 2007). I identify certain elements in my narrative that stand out as useful guidelines in my academic endeavours (possibly foreshadowing the experience of my research participants), and in facing the challenges of life in general: the experience of selecting ‘behavioural evidence’ to support my ‘schemata’ (Markus, 1998) as a self-efficacious person—one who will initiate action, who will apply effort to a situation, and who will persevere in the face of obstacles—is reassuring and satisfying.

How else to evaluate the writing? Discussing criteria for autoethnography and other ‘alternative’ forms of qualitative inquiry, Bochner (2000) posits that in recognition of the field of study and “phenomena we study [being] messy, complicated, uncertain, and soft” (p.267), there can be no one final set of criteria that will yield a satisfactory verdict. I would hope that my autoethnography satisfies some of Ellis’ (2000) criteria for evaluating autoethnography: that it engages the reader, that it provides some understanding of the lived experience of another person, and possibly has some instructive value for the reader.

The final evaluation of this paper is left to the reader who may be guided by the five criteria for evaluating ethnography (of which autoethnography is a variant) suggested by Laurel Richardson: does the work make a substantive contribution to our understanding of social life; does it possess aesthetic merit; does it exemplify reflexivity, impact on the reader, and articulate an expression of a reality? (Richardson, 2000). To colleagues from the field of psychology and unfamiliar with autoethnography I say (with encouragement and as a challenge) have a go at it! I leave the last word to Jung:

Your vision will become clear only when you look into your heart ... Who looks outside, dreams. Who looks inside, awakens.

Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961)

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